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STANFIELD HALL.

By J. F. SMITH,

Author of "Minnigrey, "Woman and Her Master," &c.

Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.

AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

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in Henry VIII.'s drawing-room in Trinity College. On the table round which they sat were the title-deeds of many a fair manor belonging to the university, forcibly taken from the muniment rooms of the different colleges. Newlight was busily occupied in taking an inventory of the college plate.

"So, then," said Ireton, with a smile of satisfaction, "it seems, gentlemen, that we are agreed in our report. The lands and manors on which these worshippers of prelacy have hitherto lived in purple idleness are to be confiscated to the profit of the State, and the edifices disposed of as his highness the Protector and the Council of the State shall think fit. Are all agreed?"

"No!" said Milton, rising with a flush of indignation upon his handsome, melancholy countenance; "in my country's name I do protest against the infamous spoliation. On peril of your unborn children's curse, I warn you against the deed. Destroy not the lever which may lift a people from ignorance to wisdom. Adjust it—remodel it—adjust it, if you will; but let it not be said in after ages, when speaking of our glorious toils, that learning fell when liberty was won."

"You plead for these old rookeries," exclaimed Ireton, with a sneer, "as for your mistress's life."

"Because I love them," replied the poet, warmly; "each fretted pinnacle is dear to me; there is not a stone of these old walls but seems familiar as a household thing. I have gazed enrapt upon each sculptured tower as the last beams of the all-glorious sun lingered in golden fondness over it. I have drunk inspiration at their classic fountains. I love them as a child should love its mother."

"We are not to be moved by words like these," exclaimed Newlight, whose cupidity was excited by the inventory of the vast piles of plate which he had taken under his special charge.

"I know it," replied Milton, contemptuously, "and have appealed."

"Appealed!" repeated Ireton, in an uneasy tone, for he knew his influence with his father-in-law; "appealed to whom?"

"To Cromwell, who arrived last night."

The members of the commission were less surprised than mortified at the intelligence; for the character of the Protector within the last few months had undergone a marked change. The death of his favourite daughter, who died reproaching him for his ambition, was a severe blow; but the publication of the celebrated pamphlet, "Killing no Murder," gave the finishing stroke to his happiness. From the moment he perused it he became restless, morose, and unhappy; saw in everyone who approached him an assassin; was continually changing his residence from place to place, never suffering it to be known one day where he intended to sleep the next. He was like a man flying from his own shadow, but found, to his consternation, that it

pursued him everywhere. Escorted by a party of his faithful Ironsides, he had arrived the preceding night from Hinchinbrook, his family seat, and taken up his residence at a farm belonging to St. John's, about two miles from the town. In the gloomy, suspicious state of mind under which he laboured, he had not even intrusted his son-in-law with the secret of his arrival. Milton was the only one to whom he had communicated it.

Gordon, a rough, brutal soldier of fortune, who had procured himself to be joined in the commission in the hope of securing an estate out of the confiscation, was about to reply, when the door of the apartment was thrown open, and an officer announced, in a loud voice :

"His Highness the Protector !"

All present rose to receive him.

Casting a hurried glance around, to assure himself that none but those upon whom he could rely were present, Cromwell entered the room. His countenance was haggard ; care, more than time, had traced deep lines on his strongly-marked features, which were pale and sallow with the sickly hue of uneasy thoughts. Without returning the salute of any of the commissioners, he several times paced to and fro the apartment, muttering to himself—a sure sign to those who knew him how fearful was the commotion which raged within.

"This is it," he murmured, "to toil for an ungrateful people ; to break their chain ; raise them from serfs to men ! Men !" he added, with a gesture of contempt ; "spaniels ! Lash them, they will crouch and fawn upon you ; raise them above the grovelling level of their own base natures, and they turn and rend you."

"Your highness," said Milton, advancing towards him, shocked at the passion by which he was moved, "whence this mistrust of all mankind—this doubt, too, of thyself ?—for he misdoubts himself who hath no faith in others."

"Read," replied Cromwell, turning sharply round, but without the least evidence of anger ; "read, and then ask me why. I have done more for England than her hundred kings : her flag floats in queen-like pride on every sea ; her commerce is respected ; I have broken the people's yoke ; from the decrepit and worn-out carcass of a feudal state have made an empire, strong and vigorous—and my reward will be assassination !"

"Assassination !" repeated all present, save Milton, each one endeavouring to express more loyalty than his fellow by the astonishment and horror painted on his face.

"Read," continued the Protector, thrusting a paper into the hand of the poet ; "read, read !"

Milton's eye glanced over the proclamation, which was signed "Charles," and proffered knighthood and a reward of twenty thousand pounds to whoever should do justice on the usurper, as

he was pleased to style Cromwell, and avenge his royal father's death.

"Coward!" exclaimed Gordon.

"Wretched malignant!" added Newlight.

"Dishonoured gentleman!" sighed Milton; "assassination would condemn the noblest cause."

"To every market-cross," said Cromwell, "I hear the accursed proclamation hath been fixed. Till now I have been merciful with the malignants; but, by my soul, I swear that from henceforth I'll hunt them through the land. No pity, no remorse! the cord and axe shall be each traitor's doom. Man, child, or woman, be they guilty, die!"

At this moment a noise as of someone in altercation was heard in the ante-room. The speaker started, looked suspiciously round him, and directed the officer, who had remained since his entrance into the apartment at the door, to ascertain the cause.

As he withdrew Milton saw, to his astonishment and dissatisfaction, that it was no other than Herbert and Mary's old enemy—the vindictive, disappointed Barford.

"He here!" he said, reproachfully fixing his eyes on the Protector. "Cromwell, such should not be the associates of a name like thine."

"Where most are false I care not to pry too curiously into the motives of one, if true; besides, he hath the bloodhound's perseverance and keen scent—hath already wrought one service, and he is bound to me," added the regicide, "by a tie so strong that, had he the will, he lacks the strength to break it."

"Thou didst scorn him once," interrupted the poet.

"And do so still," replied the Protector, impatiently; "yet still I use him. Now," he continued, turning to the door as Barford entered, "what meant that interruption?"

"An aged man, who refuses to depart till he has audience of the commissioners. He has a secret."

"Pshaw!"

"Touching, he says, the Lord Protector's safety."

"Admit him instantly," exclaimed Cromwell, "but first send Dick of the Belt to me; bid him bring his piece, and see it well charged. More plots," he added, "more contrivances! There is some spell in royalty that men should risk their lives as things of the lightest moment for a smile of it."

As soon as the reader's old acquaintance Dick of the Belt entered the room, the speaker walked close up to him, and laying his hand familiarly upon his shoulder, whispered:

"Is your weapon charged?"

"It is, your highness."

"And thine eye quick as thy hand once was prompt?"

"As quick as ever, your highness."

"Enough; we are about to admit a stranger to our person, a grey-haired man, yet trust not thou to that—treason may lurk 'neath age. At the least sign or movement threatening our person, fire."

"I understand your highness."

The next moment Gripe was admitted, and related to the astonished Cromwell that Charles Stuart had passed the night within a few miles of his own resting-place—Charles, whom he believed at the Hague.

"May this be true?" demanded Cromwell, looking round the table as if to gather the opinions of those present. "S'dearth, this old man trifles with us, abusing our ears with idle tales, incredulous and vain."

"Idle tales!" repeated Gripe, not knowing he was addressing himself to the Protector. "Your master would not treat me as a dreamer or forger of idle tales if he knew that within an hour I could place the Lord Wilmot in his hands."

Here Barford, who was standing behind the chair of Cromwell, hastily wrote on a piece of paper a few hurried words, and left the room.

"Do this, and I believe all thou assertest, wild as it may seem."

"It is easy to say do it," replied Gripe, "but how much am I to have!"

"Knowing where the traitor lies concealed," observed Ireton, "it is treason to conceal it."

"And the punishment of treason is death," added Cromwell, sternly.

"Death! Pooh! pooh! You cannot frighten me."

"Insolence! this to the Protector!" exclaimed Newlight. "Your highness, shall I order him to prison?"

Before Cromwell could reply the old gyp advanced to the foot of the table, and stood with his eyes fixed upon him for several moments in intense admiration.

"And art thou really Cromwell?" he demanded, "he who is rich with the spoil of kings—the heritage of princes! How could I honour thee!"

"Speak, old man!" exclaimed the impatient regicide. "Thy life hangs on thy words!"

Gripe looked quickly up into the speaker's face before he answered him, his deep-set grey eyes flashing anger and cunning.

"You spoke of idle tales just now: I speak of idle threats. You will not take the life of him whose word can perchance save thine, for snares are spread to catch thee! You dare not!"

"Name thy price, man!—name thy price!"

"Aye, now you are reasonable," chuckled the old gyp. "I knew we should understand each other. Make me commissioner with these fair gentlemen for the confiscation of the college lands. I

can give information known but to few—can tell the value of each farm and tithe.”

“Be it so,” said Cromwell.

“Thy word is sacred?”

“Not e’en my enemies have doubted it.”

An hour after a party who had been sent to search the cottage on the moor and arrest the disguised Royalist returned with the intelligence that he had escaped, but must have been hotly pressed, for he had left all his papers behind. One of these proved to be a letter from Sir Herbert of Stanfield, in which he begged of Lord Wilmot to give an inclosed letter—which was wanting—to the king, and assure his majesty both of his own and son’s devotion to the Royal cause.

“So!” exclaimed Cromwell, as he read the fatal paper, “this is the recompense for the indulgence, even to weakness, shown, Milton, to thy friend; but I have sworn the hour of mercy is for ever past. Barford, hasten to the Manor House; I can trust thy zeal in this; arrest Sir Herbert and the young traitor, his son. Thou wilt remain there,” he added, in an undertone, “till I arrive.”

“Mercy, your highness!” exclaimed Milton, “mercy!”

Barford quietly drew from his pocket the token which the Protector had given him the night previous to Charles’s execution, and whispered in his ear:

“Justice! justice!”

Cromwell remembered his oath.

“Is this,” he asked, laying the letter before the poet, “the handwriting of thy friend?”

“It is. Yet hear me—a last word.”

“Hear it from me,” replied the regicide, sternly; “he dies!”

“But his wife—his innocent, his virtuous wife—thou wilt not—darest not,” added the poet, “leave her to the mercy of that villain!”

The Protector advanced quietly across the chamber to where Barford was standing, and fixing his eyes upon him with an expression which few could bear unmoved, he said:

“This traitor hath a wife; respect her as thou wouldst the honour of thy mother. Harassed though I am by traitors, beset by assassins, I make no war on women.”

Barford bit his lip nearly through with vexation, bowed, and withdrew.

An hour later, and the Manor House, so long the abode of love and happiness, was a scene of desolation. Herbert and his son, arrested by Barford, had been conveyed to prison, and Mary, frantic with grief at their arrest, borne by Martin to her chamber.

“So,” said Barford, as he paced the hall, “this for years has been my rival’s home of love. I have changed its joys to sadness. I

have lived but for revenge, and feel assured I shall achieve it. Let Cromwell but minister to my hate in this, and the tie which binds us is for ever broken. He is," he added, "the depository of a secret which earth must never hear. I could not sleep within my grave if I thought I left behind me a being who could whisper over it, 'Here lies the executioner of Charles the First!'"

The ruffian's meditations were interrupted by a footstep. Turning round, he saw, to his terror and astonishment, no less a personage than Lord Wilmot, whom he recognised, despite the disguise of an Independent preacher which he had assumed.

"You here, my lord?" said Barford. "I tremble at your danger!"

"Faith!" whispered the peer, "your warning came but just in time for me to escape. Brief—I have seen his majesty, and he consents."

"The earldom?"

"Is solemnly promised in this document," continued the Royalist, at the same time giving a parchment, "under the royal hand and seal. The tyrant once dead——"

"I will send my weapon through his heart," whispered Barford, who had long been in treaty with Charles for the assassination of the Protector.

"Here is a letter," added his lordship, "which you must lay before the tyrant. It will prove the innocence of Herbert of Stanfield."

"Certainly," replied Barford, while at the same time he thought to himself that not for his promised earldom should it meet the sight of Cromwell.

"Away!" he whispered, as he heard the tramp of cavalry coming up the avenue; "it is the regicide himself; he has the eye of a hawk; he must not meet you here—it were fatal to us both."

The peer took the hint and withdrew.

"He comes," continued Barford to himself; "the man for whom I stained my honour, dipped my hand in royal blood; who treats me as his slave—a thing whom he has bought the right to scorn and trample on. We shall soon be quits; but hold," he added, "he must not see me with these papers; his suspicions roused, he would sacrifice me to the slightest of them."

Looking round the apartment for some spot in which to conceal the important documents, Barford saw an old oak cabinet, in which were preserved several relics rescued from the ruin of Keinton. Hastily opening the door, he took from one of the shelves a gauntlet of iron, the very one left by the wounded Puritan whom Mary had sheltered on the day of the battle of Edge Hill. Placing the papers within the glove, he returned it to its place, locked the door of the cabinet, and thrust the key in his bosom just as Cromwell entered the room.

"But just in time," he murmured; "just in time."

CHAPTER XXII.

"ARE my orders obeyed?" demanded the Protector of Barford, as the latter bowed low to conceal the confusion which the unexpected arrival of the man against whose life he was plotting occasioned.

"They are, your highness."

"Herbert of Stanfield and his son are both prisoners?"

"Both," replied the traitor, with a flush of triumph which he could ill conceal.

Cromwell walked towards him, and, fixing his eye with a loathing expression upon him, demanded if he had scrupulously observed his commands touching the Lady Mary; for, inveterate as he was against the husband for his supposed complicity in the plot of Charles to assassinate him, the influence of Milton and the Master of Wilton was still sufficient with him to induce him to protect the wife against her remorseless enemy. Perhaps, too, he felt a secret pleasure, even at the moment when he showed himself the most severe, in showing that he could be just.

"In every point, your highness," said Barford, pale with rage, "your orders have been obeyed: the traitors are in prison—the Lady Mary's privacy has not been disturbed."

"'Tis well. See thou molest her not. Cast but a pebble in her path, and it were better thou hadst never been born. Eyes thou canst not see watch over her."

"Methinks the service I have rendered—my devotion to the cause, deserve a different recompense," observed Barford, moodily. "Posterity will say that Cromwell cared less for his friends than those who served against him."

"Service!" repeated the Protector, gloomily; "ay, the butcher's service. What tie," he added, proudly, "can there be between us, thou thing whom I have used, have paid, and scorn?"

"My arm——" exclaimed the traitor.

"Performed the hangman's office," interrupted Cromwell, calmly; "not the patriot's. But enough of this. Were the service upon which thou pridest thyself but known, men would shrink from thee as from a leprosy; thy very blood would hate thee!"

Barford drew from his bosom the sword-knot which the speaker had given him on the occasion of the interview between them which preceded the execution of the unfortunate Charles, and, unmoved by the contumely which the Protector heaped upon him—for he had recovered his self-possession—held it up to his view.

"Does your highness recognise the token?" he demanded.

"I do."

"And the oath which accompanied it—that, no matter who might

intercede—how near or how dear the criminals might be, their age or sex, thou wouldst be deaf to every plea of mercy ?”

“Fear not,” said Cromwell, with a bitter smile, “but I shall keep my oath. Now, then, begone. In an hour a council of war will assemble; conduct your prisoners before them; they have my orders to show strict justice.”

Barford involuntarily cast a look upon the cabinet which contained the proofs of his guilt, and hesitated before quitting the apartment. At the moment, he bitterly regretted that he had let the important papers out of his possession, and he resolved to return on the first opportunity to reclaim them.

“Not gone !” exclaimed Oliver in surprise. “I am not accustomed, sir, to speak my pleasure twice.”

Barford bit his lip with vexation, bowed, and withdrew, muttering, as he went, curses—not loud, but deep.

The earldom promised by Charles for the Protector’s taking off had fired his ambition; and so deeply was he incensed at the bitter scorn he had received, that he had even there and then attempted his purpose, had not the conviction that in assassinating Oliver he would save the life of Herbert restrained him.

As soon as he was gone, Cromwell threw himself into the easy-chair usually occupied by the Knight of Keinton, and remained for awhile buried in reflection. He had become suspicious of all; terror, like a cloud, encompassed him; disappointment and bitterness were at his heart. Many of his old companions in arms had fallen from him; the Presbyterians were secretly conspiring against him; and he felt that he could only maintain his position by unwearied energy and severity.

“So,” he murmured, looking round the lofty chamber in which he sat, “another hearth made desolate. Yet why should I regret it? They would have ruined mine—why should I pity them? Fools,” he added, “fools! I would have made England the heaven of the world—the altar of civil and religious freedom—the pædium of humanity, had they had hearts or minds to second me. As it is, what have I toiled for?—an ungrateful people, who envy me their fallen idol’s seat. Alas! they little know ’tis thorns. In rising from their ranks I grasped a sceptre, but never found a friend.”

The speaker’s meditations were interrupted by a deep-drawn sigh, so near him that he fancied he felt the drawer’s breath. Turning in his chair, he beheld a matronly woman, whose person still retained great traces of beauty, and an aged man with a venerable white head and hair, kneeling at a short distance from him. They had entered the room so silently, and he had been so absorbed in his reverie, that he had not perceived their entrance. The intruders were the Lady of Stanfield and the old knight her father.

"How now?" demanded the Protector, sternly; "what do you there? Who are you?"

"A wretched woman," sobbed Mary, "who, if you incline not your heart to mercy, must soon deplore a husband and a son."

"Ah! the Lady of Stanfield?"

The mourner meekly bowed her head in token that he had rightly named her.

"As for thy husband and thy son, woman," resumed Cromwell, "they shall have justice; the tribunal before which I sent them is composed of conscientious men who tamper not with truth; by their own acts will they be judged."

"But circumstance," urged Mary, "may fling a shade of doubt upon the innocent; and then it is that Mercy wrests the sword from yielding Justice's hand. I would pray for mercy," she added, "but know not how to speak. Tears are my prayers; listen to their supplication; send me not hence a widowed, childless woman! Be merciful, and every hour of my future life shall bless thee!"

"Give me my grandson back," faltered Sir Malcolm; "he is but a child!"

"Old enough to conspire with his father, though," observed the Protector coldly. "Justice must have its course. If innocent, fear not their acquittal; if guilty, hope not their pardon; for I have sworn never to show mercy more."

"Unnatural oath," said Mary, shuddering, "when all have need of it."

"Go to!" said Cromwell, sternly; "I am not to be schooled. I, too, have daughters fair as thou art, who love their father—are the light of his domestic hearth; yet little the assassins reck of them. They would destroy me, not in honourable fight, where more than once I tamed their pride; but with the dagger, poison, or such means as cowardice and treachery give birth to. To pardon foes taken in open fight may be imprudent, but at least 'tis noble; but mercy to the assassin were the fool's virtue."

"My husband is no assassin!" exclaimed Mary, proudly. "Royalist, he loved and mourned his king; as a knight he would in open fight avenge him. But an assassin!—oh, never! never!"

"You speak it well," said Oliver, with a sneer, for he was becoming impatient of the scene. "A Royalist, of course, must be incapable of crime—a pattern of virtue. You," he added, "who are a woman nobly born and gently nurtured, have, I doubt not, smiled at many a patriot's dying groan."

"You wrong me, your highness," replied Mary, bursting into tears; "indeed you wrong me! True, I am a Royalist; but never have I smiled at grief or agony in any of God's creatures; in the hour of pain or danger all were alike to me."

"All," repeated Sir Malcolm. "Why, it was but at the battle

of Edge Hill that she concealed in my house at Keinton one of the rebel leaders."

"At Keinton!" said Cromwell, starting from his seat and eying the person of Mary with attention.

"Hush! father, hush!" whispered the Lady of Stanfield, fearing that the Protector was offended at the term "rebel leader," which the old man so incautiously used.

"And so you saved *this rebel leader's life*?" said Oliver; "a likely story, faith!"

"But a true one, your highness."

"Know you his name?"

"No."

"Nor aught respecting him?"

"Nothing."

"I know," interrupted the Knight of Keinton, who, with the garrulous impatience of age, would speak, "that he was a rebel, crop-eared knave, and stole my best horse, Firefly—a traitor villain!"

It was in vain that Mary endeavoured to restrain the indignation of the old man, whose anger at the recollection of the loss of his horse made him forget in whose presence he gave vent to it.

"Pardon him, your highness!" she exclaimed, "he is old, and knows not what he says. Age and misfortune have so bowed him down, that broken memory confounds both past and present."

"But this crop-eared knave," continued Cromwell, who seemed to take a malicious pleasure in repeating the offensive words used by her father, "have you *no proof* of the tale you have told me?"

"Except my word, none, your highness, none. Yet stay," she added, suddenly recollecting herself, "in yonder cabinet is an iron gauntlet, left by the fugitive in token of defiance of Prince Rupert and the Cavaliers who followed him."

"In that cabinet? And the key?"

"I have it not; doubtless 'tis with my husband. Oh! be merciful!" she exclaimed, suddenly falling on her knees and seizing the hand of the great regicide; "one word will dry my tears—one little word. Banish us to a foreign land, ne'er to see England more; but if you have a human heart, spare, oh! spare my husband and my son! A child," she added, passionately,—"a noble, gentle boy—you cannot, will not, have the heart to take his life!"

"Lady," said Oliver, "were there treason levelled at myself alone, I might perchance forgive them; but through me they strive to reach my country, drown its young freedom in my blood, for a reason which thou wotest not of. I fain would bid thy son and husband live; but I have sworn henceforth to show no mercy. I swore the same oath the night before Charles Stuart died. My wife and children knelt to me in vain. I dare not tempt my fate; I will not break that oath."

"If, then, the cruel men to whom thou hast consigned them should condemn?"

"They die," said Cromwell, slowly, "although an angel's voice should plead for them. Place thy hope in their innocence, for by my soul thou hast no other."

The cold and marble-like expression of the speaker's face convinced the suppliant that all hope of mercy, in the event of her husband and boy's condemnation, was at an end. Laying her hand upon her heart, as if struck by the sudden agony of the conviction, with a deep groan she fell senseless upon the floor. Alarmed at the sound of her fall and the cries of Sir Malcolm, who wept over her with childish grief, both Martin and Milton, who had been watching at the door of the apartment, entered the room. The features of the old huntsman became nervously excited when he saw the condition to which his beloved mistress was reduced, and had he been armed, the result might have been dangerous to the cause of it.

"Remove her with all gentleness," said Oliver, kindly, "and thou, John, remain with me."

Martin, assisted by Sir Malcolm, raised the still insensible Lady of Stanfield in his arms, and bore her from the apartment, leaving the Protector and Milton alone.

"At what hour do the council meet?" demanded the former.

"At eight, your highness."

"Be thou there, John—watch the proceedings—see that thy friends have justice at their hands, for I have sworn by the Lord who hath raised me to be the champion of the people, that if guilty I will show no mercy. Be dumb," he added, seeing that the poet was about to speak; "not even for thee, John, will I break the oath sworn to Him who hath sustained me."

"But for his wife?"

"Ask what thou wilt," continued the Protector. "Go, summon my escort; I will give orders that none approach the house, or dare molest her. Royalist as she is, she hath a noble nature; and though I have scant cause to love the worshippers of royalty, for her sake I shall rejoice to find her son and husband guiltless. If not," he added sternly, "they die, although her heart-strings break with them."

Milton knew too well the determined character of the speaker to think that even his intercession could avail after he had once made up his mind to let justice take its iron course. His only remaining hope, therefore, was to hasten to the scene of trial, and endeavour, by every possible means, to defend the accused, and see that they had fair-play.

Unfortunately, his late opposition to the scheme of spoliation with regard to the colleges had rendered him obnoxious to those who were named to judge Herbert and his son. Bowing, therefore,

to the Protector, he left the Manor House to execute the orders he had received. Cromwell was about to follow, when an idea suddenly struck him that he should like once more to see the gauntlet which he had left upon the table in token of defiance to Rupert. Advancing toward the cabinet, he tried the doors; but they were fast locked, and, as our readers most probably will recollect, Barford had taken away the key.

"Locked," muttered Oliver; "no matter, my dagger's point is strong."

After essaying several times, he succeeded at last in inserting the point of his weapon into the lock and forcing back the bolt, and the doors flew open. Cromwell returned the dagger to his belt. Approaching nearer to the cabinet, he saw lying amidst a confusion of odds and ends, such as hawk-belts, jesses, and relics of venery, the well remembered gauntlet. With an air of respect, almost of affection, he raised it from the shelf. As he did so, the papers which the traitor Barford had concealed fell to the ground; a circumstance of which Cromwell at first took no notice, so absorbed was he by recollections awakened at the sight of the iron glove.

"Welcome, old friend!" he cried, at the same time eying the gauntlet with an expression of affection; "'tis long since we have met, and I feel pleasure at the sight of thee; this hand since then hath played at empire, wheeled the rough car of fate, and grasped the sceptre of a line of kings. But am I happier? No; those for whose rights and liberties I toiled misunderstand me—pine for the flesh-pots of their ancient bondage, as Israel's race of old pined for the fare of Egypt. What," he added, "to the soldier, patriot, or poet, were this present life, but for the hope posterity would one day do him justice, and unborn children reverse their fathers' censure?"

For some time the speaker continued his uneven walk, now stopping before some portrait and apostrophising the senseless canvas as 'twere a living thing. At the extreme end of the room, under a recess of carved oak, was a picture covered with a silken curtain. Scarcely knowing what he did, for his thoughts were engaged on bitter fancies, he drew aside the veil and discovered one of those magnificent portraits of King Charles which the magic pencil of Vandyke has left to us.

In an instant the wandering eye of the Protector became riveted to the picture; his coarse features—coarse in their outline, not expression—flushed; it seemed as if accident had replied to his hope that posterity would do justice to his character by raising up the shade of Charles.

"Why, ay," said Cromwell, forcing himself to gaze steadily upon the portrait, "the limner's art hath done its best; not more faithful were the reflection of the mirror than yon canvas. The cold, calm eye, the lip of pride, the lofty brow and manly grace are there.

Why, I can gaze on thee ! Living I feared thee not, and dead thy memory bears no reproach to me. Perchance," he added, "death hath removed the veil which flattery weaves, with which cringing courtiers, prating of right divine, blindfold their idol, and from the world of shadows thy spirit does me justice : it must be so, for there are no flatterers and but few courtiers there."

Soothed by the idea that Charles, freed from the errors and prejudices of education, the doctrines of kingcraft so carefully implanted in his bosom by his pedantic father, did justice to the motives which had induced the arch-regicide to arm against him, Cromwell turned calmly from the portrait, and walked towards the door ; as he did so his eye glanced by accident upon the papers which had fallen from the iron glove as he took it from the cabinet.

"What have we here ?" he exclaimed, as he stooped to raise them. "Ah ! I remember—they fell from the gauntlet even now ; perhaps some memorandum of the way in which 'twas left at Keinton."

He was about to throw the papers back again into the cabinet, when a seal, attached by purple ribbon, which had been concealed inside the parchment, slipped through the folds, and hung dangling in sight. Cromwell started as he beheld it, for he recognised the arms at once.

"By Heavens !" he exclaimed, "the seal of the boy Charles !"

Reseating himself at the table, he carefully examined the documents thus accidentally revealed to him. The first was the promise of an earldom and a reward of twenty thousand pounds to Barford on condition of his assassinating Cromwell.

"Good !" exclaimed the Protector, with a bitter laugh—"good ! Charles ennobles his father's executioner ! Is't enough to make the angels weep and Satan laugh, to see how crime conducts to crime ? Charles, whom I have beaten in the field, would assassinate me, stab me in the dark, in the bosom of my home, the presence of my children ; and to gratify his hate, cover himself with eternal infamy by ennobling the executioner ! Fool, as well as knave, coward, and villain ! The sword which struck thy pride at Worcester may reach thee yet. Barford, too !—the man whom I have spared from scorn—he to seek my life ! But he shall die—die in the flush of triumph—die with his sins unrepented on his guilty soul ! Milton was right," he continued ; "an evil compact hath an evil end."

The next paper was the letter which Lord Wilmot had given Barford to lay before the Protector. It was Herbert's reply addressed to the king, in answer to the proposal made to him to assist in the assassination of Cromwell. It ran thus :

"Sire, I am a soldier, but I am a Christian. Should fortune smile upon your majesty's endeavours, and you again encounter Cromwell in the field, I shall be ready as a knight and gentleman

to do my duty ; but till then his person is as sacred from any attempt of mine as the life of your majesty itself would be. Whether justly or unjustly condemned, I cannot be his executioner."

The letter was signed "Herbert of Stanfield," and concluded by assuring the king of the writer and his son's devotion to his cause and family.

"So," said Cromwell, after he had perused it twice, "this is the man whom false appearance would condemn—whom Barford follows with relentless hate—whose life, unless I interpose my hand, is as surely forfeited as he is guiltless of the crime supposed. 'Tis well, 'tis well," he added. "I am glad, for the sake of England's honour, but one wretch can be found to earn an earldom at such a price ! An earldom !" he repeated, scornfully ; "it shall be conferred within the grave, then ! As for this letter, Heaven directed me ! I yet can keep my oath, and pay the woman back the life she gave !"

That same evening the decision of the council of war, before whom Herbert and his son were tried, was laid before the Protector by his son-in-law, Ireton, who complained that the decision of the members would have been sooner given but for the interference of Milton, who had defended the prisoners with an eloquence and obstinacy which, had anyone less than Cromwell been interested in the result, must have led to an acquittal."

"The verdict, man ! the verdict !" impatiently interrupted his father-in-law, not over-pleased at the attempt to excite his anger against perhaps the only man whose probity he had never suspected. "What is the finding of the council ?"

"Guilty !"

"And the sentence ?"

"Death !"

There was a pause ; a strange smile passed over the lips of Cromwell as he thought on the fallibility of human judgment. Ireton eyed him curiously ; but frequent as had been his opportunity, he had failed to obtain the clue to the character of this extraordinary man.

"When," he demanded, "is it your highness's pleasure the execution should take place ?"

"To-morrow morning, at six !"

"Have you any directions to give touching the manner of the traitor's death ?"

"Hamilton," replied Cromwell, sharply, as if impatient at being questioned, "will receive my orders. To him and my faithful Ironsides I confide the execution of the righteous doom. What more ?" he said, seeing that his son-in-law was about to speak.

"Not much, only Barford waits without."

"What seeks he ?"

"The fulfilment of a long-promised boon."

"Fear not," said the Protector, bitterly; "the promise shall be kept!"

Ireton shuddered at the peculiar expression of his father-in-law's countenance. He had remarked it but once before—the day when Cromwell caused him to intercept the letter which Charles had written to his queen.

"He solicits an audience."

"Let him approach, then," said the Protector, "and stand thou between him and me. I can trust to thy quick eye and ready hand should he have evil thoughts against our person."

"He! Barford have evil thoughts against thee!" repeated Ireton, in astonishment. "Why I would as soon believe that I entertained such thoughts myself. No, father-in-law, let who will be traitors, I'd stake my life on Barford's faith."

"Doubtless!" exclaimed Cromwell, darting at him a suspicious glance, for it had positively become a malady with him to suspect all who approached him. "Send Hamilton and Dick of the Belt; they see but as I see, hear with my ears. I have no doubt of them."

"Nor of me, I should hope," said Ireton.

"I hope so too."

"Look ye, father-in-law," exclaimed the soldier, chafed beyond the observance of that respectful deference which he entertained for the Protector, "I may not have the head to comprehend all your fine strokes of policy, but I have a heart at least to feel when it is outraged in its loyalty. If I never loved you—for you are one of those cold, iron natures which few men love—I at least respect you for your energy, soldier-like qualities, and courage. So speak out. If you have any crotchet in your head against me, at least let me hear it. There should be no doubts between us; for if our hearts and minds are separate, our interests are one."

"True," replied the regicide; "and that is often a stronger tie than blood or kindred love. As thou sayest, *our interests are one—I am necessary to thee*; and therein lies my safety—I had not thought of that. Go," he added, bitterly; "I am satisfied thou still art faithful."

"Your highness does me wrong."

"Admit this Barford to our presence," exclaimed Cromwell, in a tone which Ireton knew, from frequent experience, admitted of no dispute. "Go and conduct him hither: that done, leave him and me together."

"True," muttered the speaker, as soon as his son-in-law had withdrawn, and he was left alone; "the bull-pated soldier spake but truly. I am one of those whom few men love! for few can understand me. Those who see my ambition, see not that it went hand in hand with my love of England's greatness. Those who have traced the impress of my footsteps between the scaffold and the throne mark not the foundation stones on which Liberty in

after years shall rear her radiant altar. Like some comet in the heavens, the ignorant gaze astonished at my course ; the wise alone speculate on the end and purpose of my strange career."

The door of the apartment opened, and Barford entered the room. The few words which had fallen from Ireton had seriously alarmed him.

He was uneasy lest the papers concealed within the gauntlet had been discovered.

"I shall soon know my fate," he thought, as he entered the chamber in which Cromwell was sitting. "If his highness's suspicions are excited, it will be but one step from his presence to a prison. But I will not fall alone," he added, as he pressed theommel of a pistol concealed beneath his cloak ! "I am armed, and prepared to meet the worst."

Cromwell, who was writing at a table, which he contrived to keep between Barford and himself during their interview, at first did not seem to notice the presence of his visitor, whom he kept standing while he finished and sealed a letter ; when, suddenly fixing his eyes upon him, he exclaimed :

"So thou would'st speak with me ?"

"I would ; and, if your highness's memory hath not failed you, I would remind you of a service rendered, which gave to fate the lie, and placed a sceptre in your grasp."

"Go on," said Cromwell.

"Of conspiracies detected by my perseverance."

"Proceed."

"Of long devotion to your cause and person."

"True," said Cromwell, sarcastically ; "we are somewhat your debtor. Fear not but we will one day strike the balance."

"To-morrow, your highness, to-morrow."

"To-morrow be it then ; but how—and where ?"

"By giving me the command of the party destined to execute the traitors, Herbert of Stanfield and his son—her son," he muttered to himself. "Do this, your highness, and every debt between us will be cancelled."

"It is a cruel wish," said Cromwell, willing to try if any spark of humanity remained in the breast of the Puritan. "A very cruel thing to gaze upon the dying enemy !—mark the agony of his sigh and thickening breath ! I, too, have hated," he added, "in my time, but never felt pleasure in witnessing the sufferings of those I hated."

"But thou hast not been wronged like me," said Barford. "The honey of thy life has not been turned to gall, thy cherished hope to disappointment, thy youthful years to premature old age. All this and more Herbert of Stanfield hath caused to me."

"But his son at least is guiltless towards thee."

"'Tis in his death I reach his obdurate heart. By Heavens !

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